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WRAPAROUND	3	Whole Earth Epilog	
	4	Land Use	8 Nomadics
	4	Shelter	10 Communications
	6	Soft Technology	10 Learning
	8	Community	105 The CoEvolution Quarterly

<i>Hugh Gardner</i>	14	GOODBYE, COLORADO The new settlers of one of our last frontiers are turning it into a replica of what they wanted to escape
<i>Jim Hougan</i>	24	HARD TIMES AT THE TH NS NEWS If a Greek paper prints anything less innocuous than soccer news, it may not print another edition
<i>Paul Bender</i>	36	PRIVACIES OF LIFE The Supreme Court peers into the Constitution and discovers a new right to personal happiness
<i>William Ophuls</i>	47	THE SCARCITY SOCIETY If we mismanage our natural resources, we may run low on liberty as well
<i>Joe McGinniss</i>	65	WINNING HEARTS AND MINDS IN SOUTH CAROLINA William Westmoreland turns to politics and finally spots the light at the end of the tunnel
<i>Isaac Bashevis Singer</i>	74	THE FATALIST A short story
<i>Florence King</i>	78	THE GOOD OLE BOY His habitat may be the South, but this species can be found anywhere
<i>Alberto Moravia</i>	83	AFRICAN JOURNEY A novelist's view of a prehistoric and extravagant world
<i>Jack Richardson</i>	94	BOOKS: SELF-EXPRESSION AND OTHER VICES OF STYLE
<i>Charles Newman</i>	98	AN EXEMPLARY LIFE
<i>Lewis Thomas</i>	100	SYSTEMS WITHIN SYSTEMS

COMMENTARY

90	Contribution by Mark Vonnegut
----	-------------------------------

DEPARTMENTS

12	ABOUT THIS ISSUE
102	LETTERS On pyramids, seeing, farm subsidies, nothingness, and St. Louis
104	GAME
113	CLASSIFIED

Cover: Earthrise to earthset: a daylong sequence of color photographs of the earth taken by the ATS-III satellite from a point 22,300 miles above South America. The satellite was launched by NASA on November 5, 1967.

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HARD TIMES AT THE ATHENS NEWS

If you go to Greece, read the funny pages last

BECAUSE DICTATORSHIP is a political extreme, one usually thinks of its extremities: political prisoners, torture, midnight arrests, tanks rumbling through city streets. Greece has, and has had, all of these.

What follows, however, is a report about a more mundane aspect of dictatorship: its day-to-day effects on a small newspaper and two journalists who write for it. The article is based upon information and interviews gathered before the second, most recent, coup d'état in Greece. But statements by the new strong man, Brig. Gen. Dimitrios Ioannidis, suggest that a change in dictators has not produced a softening in the regime's attitude toward the press. On the contrary, the situation apparently has become even more difficult than before. In the week following his coup, Ioannidis twice ordered all Athenian newspaper publishers to appear before him at military police headquarters, a place which, to most Greeks, is synonymous with a torture chamber. His message to the publishers was explicit: tread very carefully or lose everything. Questioned about his role in the government, Ioannidis made the situation perfectly clear: "You were not called here for a dialogue," he snapped, "but to listen to what I say." Within a few days, one Athens daily (*Pradyni*) had been closed down; most of the others were devoting their columns to soccer news.

AFTER VISITING GREECE, I can report that the pen is not, in fact, mightier than the sword.

If it were, the man who sometimes follows Christos Economou to work



Jim Hougan

would carry a brace of Parker 75s. Instead, he has what appears to be a .38 jammed into the top of his pants. The gun is visible when the wind catches the flaps of his sports jacket, blowing them to the sides, and the man who wears the gun makes no attempt to hide it. On the contrary, he stands with his hands in his pockets on the corner of one of Athens' busiest streets, watching Economou devour souvlaki at a sidewalk stand.

"He's one of our cowboys," Economou jokes, following my stare. "Authentic Greek: Iannis Wayne-opoulis."

The comment is apt: there's something frontierlike in the way the man flaunts his weapon, his casual ostentation and bluff indifference to gaping tourists and passersby. Rocking

Jim Hougan, a frequent visitor to Greece and observer of the 1967 coup, is now living in Maine and working on a book.

back and forth on his heels in the umbra of a curlicued Coca-Cola sign, he makes it clear that the term "security police" is at least partly figurative.

Finishing his souvlaki with a gulp, Economou leads me toward a building whose faded sign reads "the News." Behind us, the policeman follows at an indiscreet distance.

The *Athens News*, for which Economou writes a regular column, is simultaneously one of the least pretentious and most remarkable newspapers in Europe. An English-language daily published in the capital of Greece, it has a circulation limited mostly to tourists, students, intellectuals, and embassy staffers, about fifteen thousand of whom buy the paper as soon as it hits the kiosks.

Physically, the tabloid looks as if it had been composed by a man with a chronic case of the hiccups. Lines of print often come out looking like this, and since the printers do not speak English, sentences are sometimes jumbled up or disemboweled in a way that suggests the style of William Burroughs. Reading the *Athens News* can be a dizzying experience, a sort of literary *mal de mer*.

But the risks are worth it. The paper is filled with page after page of solid information on Greek affairs, news often unpublished elsewhere in Greece. The newspaper's editorial stance is belligerently democratic, a position that does not ingratiate it with the country's authoritarian military regime.

This freedom itself is extraordinary. Newspapers whose circulation is confined mostly to tourists and foreign residents are almost always conservative or neutral, as was the *Athen*.

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THE TH NS NEWS

News before the 1967 coup. Most publishers are reluctant to risk government reprisals for what is obviously a quixotic effort, the journalist equivalent of casting pearls before swine. And yet this is precisely the effort that the *Athens News* has chosen to make. It is, in effect, "journal of resistance" distributed primarily to vacationers, "package tourists" who are more interested in airline timetables than in timetables for general elections in Greece.

In a country whose regime is noted for its tolerance of critics, it is surprising that the *Athens News* is allowed to publish. Other periodicals (such as the magazine *Anti*) have been ruthlessly suppressed, their publishers beaten and jailed, for doing no more than what the *Athens News* does every day. How do they get away with it?

The explanation most commonly advanced by those who resist the regime, including reporters on the *Athens News* itself, is that the paper indirectly serves the interests of the junta. That is, tourists and foreign investors reading the newspaper are likely to conclude that Greece is a country with problems but that freedom of the press is not one of them. The newspaper's criticism of the junta may be harsh and to the point, but its open circulation suggests that the regime is a relatively lenient one. According to this logic, the *Athens News* is allowed to publish because it creates the (false) impression among foreigners that the government is not entirely dictatorial. This impression assuages the conscience of tourists and investors alike, while the language barrier insulates the newspaper's criticism from the Greeks themselves.

This analysis is a depressing case of a journalistic Catch-22. The newspaper's publication indirectly serves the interests of the junta, yet if it ceases publication would be unthinkable: without the *Athens News*, there would be no open vehicle for dissent within Greece. To the dictum, "Foolish and be damned!" must be added the cautionary observation that the publication is damned if it does and damned if it doesn't.

ARRIVING IN A rickety elevator on the fourth floor of 5 Haidari Street, Economou delivers his handwritten column to a pretty American

...her before typing it and delivering it to the typesetters in the back

A girl is a part-time employee. Her husband is a lieutenant commander in the Navy, a press information officer for the controversial Sixth Fleet. Her employment at the Athens *News* seems to be at loggerheads with her husband's work, since the newspaper is vigorously critical of the presence. Oddly enough, she seems no interest in the newspaper's editorial positions. "What do I care about it? I don't know. It's not my business, really. I'm just a reader," she says.

When I'm told that most of the newspaper's employees are "part-time" and that full-time work requires a work permit, which, in the case of the Athens *News*, is almost always withheld.

The style of the Athens *News* is defined by an assortment of press articles that are no less harsh for their vagueness. It is an ironic style, but frequently at a slight remove from the subject. Headlines are rife with puns, and stories are often juxtaposed in critical and humorous ways. A review of Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* has special significance in a city under military rule. A column of Economou's, openly excoriating South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu, is like a declaration of independence for every Greek. "Can I help you, Economou asks disingenuously, does he detect similarities between the communist dictatorship in Saigon and the one we have in Greece?"

Economou notes that the government is less concerned with comments in the forums of intellectuals—writers, for instance—than with what is said and permitted in the *tavla* and the popular media. As a result, reporters and columnists have to be very careful of what they write. It is a time to embarrass the government regardless of whether or not the reports are true. Any article that diminishes the "dignity" of a government official can result in a fine, disbarment from the profession, or imprisonment. Any newspaper edition confiscated by the authorities, whether by confiscation, whether "justified" or arbitrary, makes the publication of a disciplinary offense. Respect toward one's colleagues is strictly punishable by law. A two-page government decree, "On

the Journalistic Profession," is disconcertingly nebulous, but the courts have made it clear that they will interpret the law as harshly as its undetained limits will allow. The result is that with every issue's publication the staff members put large chunks of their lives in jeopardy.

The paper's publisher, Iannis Horn (who, incidentally, doesn't speak English), was sentenced to a prison term last year for what amounted to a mechanical error. The headline which sent Horn to jail—"Bombs, Recruited Schoolchildren Greet Agnew"—was faithful to the facts of the former Vice-President's visit to Greece, but the story's text omitted reference to the incidents described in the headline. Horn explained that the omission occurred when the printers dropped a type tray containing the story and unwittingly left out the first two paragraphs when they reassembled the mess. The result was an innocuous and rather unintelligible article and more than six months behind bars for the publisher.

Avoiding legal traps is something of a science at the Athens *News*; where irony is too weak, sarcasm will substitute. Thus, while a notoriously

corrupt official cannot be exposed, reference to him can always be prefaced by the suitably capitalized adjective "Incorruptible." After a while, readers begin to wonder. Similarly, the Premier of Greece can be referred to as "Our Great Leader" and "the magnificent Hero of the Revolution." No Greek judge is likely to challenge these descriptions on the grounds of accuracy or indignity, and sarcasm is eminently deniable. More importantly, perhaps, the Athens *News* employs a pictorial strategy that gives front-page play to photographs of events that the state would prefer to see buried or ignored. In this way the newspaper can report without comment the official government line that "only a few dozen" students were involved in a demonstration, while pairing that report with a picture showing thousands of youths marching through Omonia Square with banners and flags flying.

MORE PAINFUL even than the press laws is what seems to be an officially sanctioned, hardly clandestine campaign of dirty tricks. It is a flexible operation, as it must be

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At the *Athens News*, circulation has more than doubled since the 1967 coup d'état, but the increased revenue from kiosk sales has been more than negated by a decrease in advertising. Government advertising is, of course, an important source of income, and all of that has been withdrawn and placed in friendlier papers. But, despite a massive increase in tourism (which ought to benefit an English-language publication), other ads are down as well. Economou estimates that since the coup the newspaper has lost advertising worth more than 1 million drachmas per year, about \$30,000. While that might not seem like much to an American publisher, it's a fortune to the owner of a small Greek daily. Private businessmen realize that advertising in the *Athens News* is an effective way to attract tourists' dollars, but they also understand that it is a good way to attract government disfavor.

Reporters are primary targets for more direct harassment. Economou is confident that his telephone is tapped. More problematical, however, is his lack of what amounts to an official license to report the news. Because his views are unpalatable to those in power, press identification (issued by the Ministry of Information) is withheld. Lacking such identification, Economou is effectively denied access to official sources and to the places where the news is made.

Before the coup, Economou was one of the best-known and most respected reporters in Greece. During more than twenty years of newspaperwork, he'd been political editor of Helen Vlachos's conservative *Messimivri* and had obtained exclusive interviews with Eisenhower and Khrushchev. As a foreign correspondent he'd traveled throughout the United States, Europe, Cuba, and twice to Vietnam and the Far East. His income as a reporter was about \$1,200 per month, he had access to everyone, and he looked forward to a comfortable pension from his union when he had completed his twenty-five years of work.

Today Economou couldn't get into the Embassy of Mali. His former publisher, Helen Vlachos, is in exile, his former newspaper shut down. He can't get a passport to travel, he's

excluded from the government-controlled trade union, and the Minister of Information refuses to sign his press card.

His salary on the *Athens News* is about 15 percent of what he received at *Messimivri*, and until his press card is signed he's unable to acquire the few remaining years necessary to receive his pension. In addition, the \$300 per month that Greek journalists can make by contributing to the state-controlled radio-and-television network is no longer available to him.

These are, admittedly, only personal disasters. By and large they represent the withdrawal of many privileges and a few rights. Economou has lost his privacy, his income, his access to important places and officials, his professional standing, and his right to travel. Presumably all of these would be returned if he recanted. But that's unlikely to happen. There is a story about Economou that illustrates the thickness of his skin, and the affection with which some Greeks tell it suggests the deep pride they take in their resistance.

Economou is said to have asked an embarrassing political question of U.S. Ambassador Henry Tasca at a press conference. The question related to alleged CIA involvement in the 1967 coup. Before the Ambassador could reply, an American wire-service reporter (apparently referring to a women's boutique owned by Mrs. Economou) interrupted: "You don't have to answer that, Mr. Ambassador! Economou hasn't any official accreditation—he's just a Hades' shoe salesman." Without missing a beat, Economou turned to the reporter and replied, "Better to cross the foot of a beautiful woman than to lick the boot of a dictator."

ECONOMOU is a conservative, but his opposition to military rule in Greece crosses the political spectrum. Louis Danos also works on the *Athens News*, and Danos is not a conservative.

Formerly the editor in chief of Andreas Papandreon's daily newspaper *Anendotos*, Danos was once Economou's "opposite number." Whatever his politics (he says he's not a Marxist), Danos's prose is just as tough as Economou's.

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THE TH NS NEWS

Danos is the author of a column that appears twice a week in the *Athens News*. It's called "The Critique of Pure Reason," and the title refers less to Immanuel Kant than to the "pure reason" the junta claims must govern Greek affairs.

Danos worked on the first edition of the *Athens News*, back in 1951. He left the newspaper after a violent political argument with the conservative Iannis Horn. Danos still disagrees with Horn, but resistance to the regime has made them friends and co-workers once again.

The *Athens News* is the only source of income that Danos has. Before the coup he received a military pension that was twice his present salary, a reward for thirteen years as a soldier and compensation for battlefield wounds received in the country's civil war against the Communists. Wounded in 1948, he retired from the army as a major after two years of recovery in a military hospital. He had been decorated for heroism.

Danos lost his pension when he was arrested for conspiring to overthrow the regime. His arrest came in December 1970, and he was kept in prison for fifteen months before his trial.

"They didn't torture me," he said. "They tried to kill me instead. You see, besides my war wounds, I have tuberculosis. They knew that and kept me in a one-meter-by-one-meter cell without clothes for more than a year. Like an animal. There were no doctors. I kept alive by running in place for hours and hours, every day." In March 1972, Danos was convicted of belonging to an organization outlawed by the regime for its ties to the liberal Papandreou.

"I confessed," Danos said, "to what I had done. And to what I hadn't done. I did that because they arrested four of my family and said that they'd imprison my mother and others if I didn't confess to everything. Later, in court, I retracted most of the confession, the untrue parts, but it didn't matter."

Danos's column was sufficiently painful to the regime that the former Under-secretary of the Press, Byron Stamatopoulos, would regularly fire off telegrams to publisher Horn.

"He threatens Horn with court," Danos said, "unless he fires me. Stamatopoulos—what a fellow he is! He calls me a Communist, a fascist, an

anarchist—all in the same telegram sometimes." Danos chuckles. "And then he smiles at me and says, 'Hell how-are-you?' when I'm having coffee with friends in Syntagma Square, A Janus." Danos pauses and broods. "I don't understand the man. He used to be a socialist. You know, when I was younger, and he was younger, was a member of the Athens Union of Journalists. I was its vice-chairman. Well, after the 1967 coup d'état occurred, the government insisted that we expel forty-two of our members. We refused, and the regime took over the union. Today Stamatopoulos is Under-secretary of Press at the Ministry of Information, and I'm forbidden from even calling myself a journalist. Because, you see, to be a journalist you must be a member of the union, and the only union we have is the government union. If it happens, I'm ineligible for membership: I'm a criminal, as you know. Well, the truth is that no one in my family has ever been involved in politics. Not really. We've simply said no to the regime."

As I left, Danos had a word of advice. "Remember, if you write about us, we are just a newspaper for tourists. We publish Popeye and Donald Duck, and tell visitors where they can find an English-speaking dentist. There are no journalists here. Just part-time help." And he chuckled.

THE OLD ELEVATOR rumbles and shakes its way down to the bottom floor, arriving with a thump and a crash of opening doors. Outside the night is clear and cold. With the exception of a new Fiat parked beneath the "Athens News" sign, Harilaou Street is deserted. As I wait by, one of the car's windows rolls down and two men look out at me from behind a fog of cigarette smoke that suggests they've been sitting there for a long while.

It seems as if they're about to say something, and politeness makes me hesitate in front of them. When they don't, I'm surprised and it takes a few seconds to realize that their curiosity is too neutral and unabashed to be idle. They have the look of people who are busy remembering what they see. When the window finally rolls up again, I'm left with the feeling of dismissal and the impression that I've been tricked into posing for somebody's fact sheet.